

[Jack Dillin]

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[No. pages 17?]

[no. ???]

1. January 27, 1939

2. Jack Dillin, white, (fictitious name)

Bill Griffin (real name)

3. Maple Street (house not numbered)

4. [Sebring?], Florida

5. Citrus grove laborer

6. Barbara Berry [Darsey?], writer

7.

LIFE HISTORY

of JACK DILLIN

A flight of steep stairs led to the large room which formed the upper story of the old laundry building where Jack Dillin and his children made their home.

Jack's daughter Elsie opened the door at my knock and in a sweet voice and pleasant manner invited me to come in and be seated. She was neatly dressed and her curly brown hair was attractively brushed back from her forehead. "Papa", she said, "has just get in

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from grove work up at Highlands” and is in the bath room a-washin up some, but you be seated and wait for him.”

Jack then came in and though his blue denim overalls and jacket were soiled and work-stained, his face and hands were clean, and his curly black hair was neatly combed though it had evaded an evident attempt to plaster it down with a wet brush. He extended his hand with the greeting: “Howdy ma'am, I'm proud to see you and ifen you don't mind a-taking to me so dirty as I am why I'll be mighty glad to tell you what I can about the Citrus work. My own hist'ry too [I?] now many a person what knows the 2 kinder life I've had has told me I oughter send to one o' them magazines an' git a blank to fill out about my life and mebbe I'de make a lot o' money,” said Jack seriously.

Elsie then excused herself, put on her coat added a little rouge and powder to her face and said she was going down town to get something for supper. As she went lightly down the narrow stairs Jack said: “That sure air a fine gal o' mine, and she air mighty pretty now aint she.”

Then with a twinkle in his snapping dark brown eyes belied his serious countenance he said: “Lotsa folks says she looks jus' like me.[?] That was something that would require imagination for Elsie was really very pretty with a healthy flush, really needing no rouge, upon her tanned cheeks, while Jack's face pallid and wrinkled and etched with pain and worry could hardly be called good looking though it did express character and determination.

Then Jack proved quite valuable and launched readily in to the story of his life and his work in the Citrus.

“I been a-workin in the Citrus for more'n eighteen year now. No, I aint jus' ‘zackly a Floridy cracker but I sure am a Southerner an' mighty proud o' hit too. Both me an' my wife wus borned (born) up in Alabamy, in Pendleton* County, right near Lusie*. We lived on joinin farms an' I know that woman from the time she were a baby a-mussin — an' then fur her

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to turn in an' do me like she did. But, that's another part of my story, an' I'll tell you bout that later. No, wait a minit, mebbe I better tell you that fust off whilst Elsie is away. Elsie be right queer that-a-way, she knew how her ma done us all, an' she don't crave to go an' live with her but she shore won't let nobody say nothin' agin her ma, neither. an' ifen you want my story that's part o' hit 3 so you jus' lissen to this," said Jack.

He rocked excitedly for a few seconds and then after politely asking if I objected to tobacco he lighted a cigarette and inhaled deeply, them, " Hit's jus' like I said, both me an' her wus borned near Lusia an' aknowin each other all our lives we up an' married right early. I'm most fifty now, an' hit must o' bin twenty-eight years ago. Ida, I guess was nigh on to twenty. She came from mighty fine people too an' she were good lookin and always pleasant in her ways with folks. She were a Kell* an' to ther side o' her fambly wus Rileys*, they wus all high up in politics too. I never knowed so much about my folks excusin my father's people, I heerd him tell that his grand-daddy come over here from England but that's all I know.

"See after we married her daddy up an' died, but he left her forty acres o' fine farmin land. Her ma, an' her brother both got forty acres each too, that's all the fambly she had, I never had but one brother and one sister neither. We wus a-farmin on some rented land then so one day Ida said to me: `Why don't we fix up my place so we can live there and stop payin this here rent.' Well I had a little money I had saved, the fust an' the last I ever did save too, an' I thought that a good idee so I fixed the place all up nice like. I put a strong three strand wire fence all round them forty acres, I built a nice little house with a wood floor, no more dirt floors for us, an' a fire place an' glass winders too. By the time I got hit all fixed up I spent nigh on to nine hundred dollars on hit. I give the County twenty-five dollars to help in fixin' up the road, an' they done hit too, they put a good hard road right by our place, cause when I gived them twenty-five dollars a lot o' [?] folks did the same.

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“Well, we farmed for a spell an' made right good money too but we didn't save [nonee?] o' hit for we wus both young an' liked a good time along with a little likker now an' then. Then we got to hearin what good an' easy money they wus a-makin down in Floridy in the muck [?] roun the Lake, then we had a chanct to rent our place so we up an' came down here. That was nigh on to twenty year ago.

While Jack paused for breath and to light another cigarette I noticed that the room was very neat and clean, the floor scrubbed till it literally gleamed as did the window panes. No shades were at the windows but half curtains of unbleached muslin embroidered in gay figures were placed at the four larger windows, the smaller ones were curtained with white [scrim?]. Dishes were neatly piled in the old fashioned “kitchen safe”. On some shelves there were a few canned goods, and others held food in small dishes. The safe was screened to keep the flies out, which was very wise as the front doors of both floors were open and screenless. Two double beds, each neatly made were in opposite ends of the room and partly screened by muslin curtains, along side one bed stood a cat also neatly made and with a gay quilt folded across the foot.

Jack soon resumed his story however and demanded my attention: “She fust thing we did was to go right down to the Lake near Sugary* an' start a bean farmin. I coulda get help and worked on the shares but no suh, I wanted to be in for myself alone. I still had a little money so I put in a big bean [crop?] for everybody said that was what to plant. Well just as the beans was most a-ready to gather there come a cold spell an' a high wind and plumb ruint'em all, an me too fur that matter. Recken I losted nigh on to a thousand dollars, along with my house and what little fixins we had for they all got 5 blowed away or broke up by the wind. I jus' didn't know what on the green earth to do when here come a feller an said: ‘I been a-watchin you work an' I like the way you go about hit, so you come on up to Sebring with me an' I'll give you work in my orange grove an' see that you gits [?] [sumpun?] to eat till you gits on yore feet agin.’ That man was Mr. O. Sebring hisself, an'

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so I took my wife, our two chillens, two quilts, a blanket, an' a dollar an' fifty cents, all we had, an' went up here to Sebring an' went to work for Mr. Sebring.

“ I went right to work fer him and did anything he told me an' he paid me fair wages too an' was a good man to work fer. I guess ifen I coulda left likker alone I might be a-working fer him right now though he aint got the big groves he had then. After awhile we did get a start but I aint never had nothin for I never could git shet of the cravin fer likker an' that shore is a expense. I been a-tryin lately to give hit up an' I aint teched a drop o' no kind o' likker since way 'fore Christmus. Come Christmus Day I was plain cold sober for the fust Christmus Day in thutty year, ma'am. Why, I even went to Church on that Day this last time.

Jack sighed deeply and a contemplative look came into his expressive eyes: “ As I was a-tellin you, we stayed right on here in Sebring an' we rented a right nice house an' got some furniture for hit. We had our girl and our youngest boy here too, an' Ida she were shore plumb tickeled with the way we wus a-livin. She worked hard too an' kep' a nice house and washed and ironed all our clothes regular and cooked good meals. She shore were a fine cook, and when she worked outside like she done sometimes she cooked us a good dinner every day `fore she went to work.

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I asked Jack about Ida's work and he stated that she worked in the packing house.

“Sometimes she mad as much as fifteen dollars a week, but more oftener hit wer ten or twelve, an' the work hit warn't steedlylike neither, Them Companies tries to dee -vide the work out 'mongst the workers so they all stick. I done some packin' house work too but I don't like hit like the grove work. At the packin' house I worked eight hours a day and got me twenty five cents a hour an' fur common labor like loadin' the boxes, cleanin' up [,an'?] [such?]. The packin' hit's piece work an' fur grapefruit they paid three cents a box, oranges seven, an' tangarines ten cents. That aint much fur skilled labor like that packin' job takes but when you do know how you can make a right [smart?] o' money with hit.

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"Me an' Ida got on alright, an' we didn't never quarl (quarrel) or cuss, she never cussed me an' I never cussed her even when I was deep in the likker. She seemed to love us all an' she'd set up late o' nights, when she was in the packin' house, a-[mendin?] an' a-makin clothes fur us. Then 'bout two year a-gone she up an' run off with a feller an' she left us all an' stayed right with im in tother town near here.

Then she writ me to git a dee -vorce an' I told her to go on an git hit I wouldn't do nothin' to stop her. Now she is a-married to that man an' a-livin up near Lusia on our place. She never tried to get the chillens or nothin' o' [horn?] ([hers?]) what she left here. Recken she knowed I wouldn't let her have them chillen. I'd a-fit to the last ditch fer 'em, as you might say.

" After she left us one o' my boys, next to the oldest Jess what's now most twenty, get in trouble but hit were all a frame up agin him an' me, but anyway they sent him to jail. I mighta got him pardened to me fer I been right friendly with the judge an' he knows how hard I was a-tryin to get on, but hit all 7 got me so riled up an' I paid hit so much mind that I got rarin drunk an' tried to drive my car an' got 'rested fur hit. I get put in jail to an' lotsa folks helt (held) that agin me an' so the Judge he jus' couldn't give the boy over to me. Most folks said he was a-heap better off in the jail house than he were with me. Then whilst that there ruckus were a-goin on a neighbor what was jealous up an' went to Judge an' said Elsie were a-runnin on the streets day an' night, an' asked Judge to give Elsie to her. The had a reglar trial too an [letsapromnentest?] folks here up an' swore to things whut was not true 'bout me, an' so Judge he said, 'Jack, I don't like to do this but I'm a-goin to give Elsie to this here lady fur a year an' see how you all gets on fer the evidence hits mighty strong that you aint a-takin the proper care o' her. Well, ma'am, shore 'nough, he did give Elsie to that woman, I just kaint call her me lady though fer she nigh 'bout ruint little Elsie. She had a little money a' she let Elsie spend a lot an' do what ever she pleased an' she made her vain-like an' taught her to paint her face an' her fingernails an' I shore don't like none o' that fer folks in [fer?] [?] fixes, hit don't look right. She put a lot o'

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fool notions in Elsie's head, yet do you know that when the year were up Elsie she 'lected to come back to me an' believe me I shore were proud. I up an' told that woman an' the Judge too if anybody ever mess with me agin an' muss up my fambly like they done I sore a-goin to git my shotgun an just pure grave-yard kill 'em too, an' I sore mean hit." Jack sighed deeply and seemed quite saddened by his narrative.

He had well judged the time that Elsie would take for shopping too for her step was then heard on the stairs and in she came with several packages which she laid upon the table. Then 8 she came and sat near me and as Jack had ceased taking while he smoked she said shyly: "Would you like to see the quilts that my ma and me pieced? " Upon my assurance that I would indeed be very glad to see them as I was interested in handmade quilts, she went to a trunk and brough out six neatly folded gay colored quilts.

"We made up all these designs too, [don't?] you think they are pretty. Sometimes I think I will name them each with a fancy pretty name but I never have done it yet." She ran small smooth hands with tinted fingernails lovingly over the quilts as she talked. "Folks say we oughter put these quilts in the State an' County fairs but we aint done it. I would be scared they might get lost or stolen an' I want to keep them with me all the time." After I had sincerely admired each quilt in turn I helped her fold them and then she placed them back in the trunk and replaced the gay quilt which covered it.

" Pa", she said then, " I want to run down to the corner to see Mrs. Anders, she said she had a little present for me, but I won't stay long." Jack said she could go and so she excused her self politely and again went out.

Jack seemed to be listening to her footsteps down the stairway and out on the sidewalk and then he resumed his talk[:?] " That ther woman what kept her fur a year did give her some nice clothes and taught her more good manners, an' I reckon she would a-soon lernt to paint up anyway.

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May boy Jimmy now he aint never give me a nite o' trouble. Ever since he been a W.U. Messenger, excusin the time he were in the [CC?] Camp, an' in school. He's now twenty-one years old an' he graduates from High School come 9 June. He woulda get through a-heap sooner but he got disgusted when he came outer the [CC?] Camp an' decided not to go no more. Then the W.U.

Manager told him to get a High School education an' he could get to be a operator, but if he didn't graduate he couldn't never be one.

"I didn't want [vem?] to send him to CC Camp an' ifen they'd a sent Jess might not be in all heap o' trouble now. But nothin' would do the Releif but they must send Jimmy, I think hit were the FERA that sent him but I aint sure, hit mighta been the WPA. Jimmy works now on the NYA. some Youth work he calls hit an' he makes fifteen dollars a month but with all his expenses in school he don't save any. Sometimes he helps me some though. Now he hoped (helped) me buy my new tag fer the car. I get to have hit in my work an' so we get the tag while we had the money.

"Papa, Jimmy's got his class ring an' you oughter see it," screeched a shrill young voice on the stairway, and in burst a frail looking boy with books slung over his shoulder.

"[Sen?], speak to the lady an' take yore cap offen in the house, how many times I got to tell you that. That's my youngest son, Billy, ma'am. He ain't but eleven fifteen years old but he's in the tenth grade in the High School an' there aint no tother child what makes any better marks an' he does. Well now son, you say Jimmy got his class ring today. I knew he sore is proud o' it, he had to send off eleven dollars fur hit ma'am an' seemed just like hit never woulda come. All the boys an' girls of the class get them these rings, that's to show they graduated from High School, I reckon."

"[Poppa?], this ring is pure gold, Jimmy said so, and it's got raised letters on it. When I get ready to graduate can I have 10 a pure gold ring with raised letters, Poppa?" Billy

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was almost whining by this time but upon hearing a whistle from below he flung his books aside, grabbed his cap from the chair where he had thrown it and ran back down without more words.

"I declare ma'am, I hope you will be scusin that child, seems like [he's?] the hardest to larn anything. He just don't pay no mind to what you say, but he sore do study his lessons. Now Elsie she is two years older' an' what Billy is but she only in the ninth grade o' school.

"I [?] never had much larnin, 'bout the third grade I reckon. My folks never thoug much o' goin' to school an' I wus needed for the farm work a lot, then too I was awful puny an' always had a misery in my stomik, so I didn't get much schoolin'. I want my chillens to learn though for I realise now what a education means. This here schoolin' now-a-days is a heap better than hit uster be, why the chillens what gets all through the High School now knows a lot more than just readin' and Writin', seems like they all are more able to take care o' theirselves too.

"[?] shore am proud o' my fambly. They ain't never give me no trouble excusin Jess, pore little fellow an' hit weren't his fault. He got 'cused o' stealin' some money but hit shore were tother boy what Jess was a-tryin to protect. Right now I'm powerful glad there aint no more chillens fur to be left with chillen even as old as mine is a awful serious thin, ma'am. But, hit could be a heap worser ifen they was little. Us pore folks aint got no business with lots o' chillens no ways. I got two good friends what's got a even dozen apiece an' how they ever a-goin to rais 'em all pesters me. Seems like hits's the real pore 11 folks what has the most chillen though an' them what's able to care fer 'em don't have none. Ifen I could just git me a job as a caretaker fer a grove an' have a little home out in the grove an' a nice garden I'de shore be happy an' hit would be fine fer the chillen.

"I wouldn't want to live in a city, hit's too noisy there an' the chillen would learn lots o' mischief. Then I like the life here in a small town where every body knows all the folks even if they do try to run my affairs fer me. I like to walk down town an' talk to my friends

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an' make new ones too. I aint a mite bashful 'bout a-speakin to folks an' if I see some body that looks pleasant I go up an' shake hands an' soon we gits a-talkin. I hears a lot about the world that-a-way that I wouldn't never know totherwise fer I ain't much hand to read none.

"Yes ma'am, I'm a-gittin to the Citrus work but I shore did tell you a lot 'fore that didn't I. Reckon hit might be right interestin' too, aint hit. Yes, I been a-working in the Citrus fer many a year now an' I reckon I knows about all they is to know an' I am a expert in all the lines of grove work. I done lotsa hoein', [?] / sproutin', diskin, an' the like, but somehow I like the prunin' best. Hit's about the hardest and most dangerous work of hit all too. Onct I fell down in a tree an stuck a big thorn way in my hip, had to have hit cut out an' I wus lame fur a long time but I kep' right on a workin'.

" I did work a long time for the different grove care takers here an' get along alright ifen I coulda just kep' off the likker. Now I works mostly independent like an' by contract fer the smaller grover owners. I can look at a grove an' estimate the time an' [cost?] o' [prunin?]

an' I get as high as fifteen cents a tree.

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Sometimes I charge only fife cents but that's fur them little trees what aint a growin' like they should. If the dead wood aint cut out regular the trees don't grow well an' after awhile they have all dead wood in them an' then there ain't no more Citrus trees. When I worked for the Companies sometimes hit were by the day an' then I got twenty-five cents a hour fer nine hours 'cause my work was skilled. When I work independant I keep at hit as long as necessary. The Comapanies was right good to their help an' ifen we worked over time they paid us not extra just the regular wage, lessin we worked at night, then we get usually five cents a hour more.

"We all tried to form a Union [onct?], an' we did get hit started an called hit the United Citrus Workers, but we couldn't agree on lotsa things an' hit didn't last long. I think maybe

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the Companies broke hit up in some way for 'course they was all agin hit for then they would a-haveta paid better prices. I feel sorry for the grove owners an' the workers, none o' 'em [?] is a-makin any money, hit's them Caretaker Companies what gits hit all. They charge such a powerful let fur their services an' pay the workers so pore. But, they do seem to try to keep their men, an' give each one some work most all the time.

“ When I worked fur a company I get up every mornin' an went to their office or where they told me to meet, but they didn't always take me 'less I was a-doin' prunin', that's so keerful work they cant change the men every day or so. I had a hour for dinner an' fer a long time get paid from the time I left home but they done quit all that now an' a man is just paid from the time he starts to work in the grove till the time he stops. They don't even count the time they is a-carryin us to and back from the [?].

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“ Lessin I'm powerful hard up I like the independant work a-heap better, hit gives me more time an' I can kinder select my work. [?] I was out a-huntin work an' I come to a old lady's house in a grove what sure did need a prunin. I talked to her an wanted to contract the work but she wouldn't let me an' said: 'I will pay you by the day an' expect you to get the grove pruned up in a tay too man.' Well, I needed the work so I told her alright an' she said she would give me two dollars an' my dinner. I said I had my dinner but that didn't make no difference to her. Now what you think ma'am, when I started to work that old lady she brought her chair out an' she sit right the every tree where I was a-workin an' told me just what branches to cut off. Come noon I was most dead, not bein uster to no such supervision as that.

“Well then she said I could knock off a hour for dinner an' while she was a-gittin hit ready I could mow the lawn. There warnt nothin' else to do but git at hit. Then she brought me out some ice cream an' about a inch o' cake fur my dinner but I was too tired to eat even that.

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Soon she called an said: 'Now my man just come an' cut the grass in the back yard your noon hour ain't up yet, but I told here I were too near dead to do that an' I flopped under a tree and rested a few minutes.

"You can believe me or not, but hit's shore the truth that when I get that grove done she sent me down the street to her sister's. She almost worked me to death too an' till hit were too dark to see. Then she said the sister said, 'Now ifen you know a man what can work real fast an' move all this trash an' [hoo?] all them trees tomorrow you send him to me, I don't think you can work as fast as I want a man to do.

I sure told her that I didn't want 14 the job, an' shore didn't know no man what could suit her. "

Jack again paused to catch his breath and to chuckle over thoughts of how the old lady worked him. "I been a picker too" he said, "an' uster make right good money at it. for grapefruit I got five cents a box, but they aint [?] a-payin but three cents these days. Then form oranges I got ten cents, an' tangerines brung twenty cents, but that's been several years agone. Now I think the tangerines bring about twelve cents. They is about a hundred an' twenty grapefruit to the box, twenty-five tangerines, an' fifty oranges, that's fur the flied field boxes which we pick in.

" I guess I make 'bout as much as most any other grove worker, excusin those that works regular fer the Companies, an' that aint many.

I manage to feed an' cloth my chillen. We don't have no fancy food but we do have plenty o' sweet potatoes, corn bread, fried flour bread an' hog meat with greens. When ever I can git milk fer the chillen an' we bake as much things as we can 'stead o' fryin them, I learnt that when I had so much stumik trouble an' misery. I wisht I could keep a good balanced diet for us all but I can't do hit these days. Everything costs so much an' prices seems a

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little worser all the time. Elsie, she's a right good little cook an' she tried to fix the things I oughter have when ever she can.

“ I had stomik misery powerful bad about three or four years ago but the Doc, he just about cured me but he had to keep a doctorin' on me for nigh on to two years. He gived me tow kinds of powders to take a hour apart an' I uster take a alarm clock to the grove with me an' try to take that medicin regular but I couldn't always do hit, sometimes I would be way of in the tother part o' the grove when the clock rung an' just wouldn't feel able to walk to the 15 place where I left the medicine. Couldn't very well take hit alone with me about the grove neither.

“ Then I had hernia an' I been operated on four times fur hit so hit don't bother me much more. I kept right a-workin fur a long tome with that a-botherin me till I got the money to have a operation fur hit. Last year I had a bad sore come on my lower lip as' tow doctors said it wera a cancer an' they doctored on me some but hit didn't do no good. Then, a old quack doctor, one o' them that traipses roun an' totes his medicine along with him come along an' said ifen I used his medicin hit would shore cure me, so I bought three bottles o' hit like he said.

Hit were a clear liquid but it burned sumpum turble an' when hit tried hit left a white stuff like salt on my lip. I kep' a-usin hit just like he tole me an' sure 'nuff after while that sore healed up. Now I get a big swelling in my neck. See that lump just under my chin on the let I think hit's a cancer too, I heard they alwas come back some tother place ifen you stop 'em one place. Hit hurts sompum turble too clear up to my ear sometimes. I been to three doctors with hit an' they won't none say whut hit is, but tow o' 'em says hit must be cut out. Tother one said he coulda cure hit with medicine an' been a-docterin on hit but don't do hit no good. I aint got money for a operation so reckon I will hafta wait some.

We talked of politics and the trouble in Europe but Jack did not know much of these things for he seldom read a paper he said. Regarding State and National politics Jack said: “

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I don't take so much stock in all that like some folks do. I don't never understand hit so what's the use to pay hit much mind an' git all worked up over hit. Why I always been a Democrat an' I reckon I always will be. it shore is the Party for us pore folks. Reckon we get the 16 best President we ever had an' I wisht he could stay right on in the office. He sure has tried to help the country an' hit ain't his fault that things aint gone so well.

“ I never was on the Govment work, excusin 'bout a month on the FERA. Just as soon as I could get work I quit hit, I don't like fur nobody to [help?] me. I kept a-hunting jobs even when I had that dreadful misery in my stomik so bad. Twiest now when I get outer work I ast the WPA to put me on but by the time they get my card ready I done found other work so I don't mess up with them no more. But [?] a mighty good thing fur them whut kaint find no work an' there shore is a pile o' folks like that.

“ All our fambly belongs to the Baptist Church, an' I get a [cousin?] in Trees* Floridy what's a baptist preacher,” stated Jack with much pride. “ I don't go to Church much no more for I Ain't got the clothes to wear an' hit shore makes you want to dress up to church else you feel powerful misurble. I sees to hit that the chillen goes an' that they all has clothes too an' look as nice as the rest o' the folks. Several times the Church-folks has offered to help me with food but I don't ever let 'em do hit.

“Seems like folks think to much o' how they looks fur Church these days. Now 'course people oughter be neat and clean but why dress up in such finery for Church an' make them what ain't got hit feel bad an' not wanten go no more.

“ Well, ma'am, I shore have enjoyed our talk an ifen I had a knowed you was a-comin today I woulda shore brung you in some oranges. I try to keep 'em always on hand fur the chillen but sometimes I forgit hit an' right now we is all out o' them. Ifen I can tell you any agin 'bout any Citrus work you just tell me fur I'll shore be powerful proud to do hit.

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Note:

Real and fictitious names used in history:

Fictitious name Real Name

Jack Dillin Bill Griffin

Elsie Clara

Jess Marcus

Jimmy Marvin

Billy Jack

Highlands Avon Park

Pendleton County Covington County

Lusia, Alabama Andalusia, Alabama

Ida Bertha

Kell [Knowles?]

Riley Cassidy

Sugary, Florida [Cloviston?]

Trees, Florida Live Oak[?]